



## Gary Francis Kurutz

August 11, 1948 - December 9, 2025

Gary Francis Kurutz (1948 – 2025)

Gary Kurutz, among the most enthusiastic and respected of California's historians, passed away peacefully at home on December 9, 2025. He was a man of grace, generosity, gratitude, good humor, and gusto! In a career that spanned more than forty years, Gary built some of the most significant and culturally diverse library collections representing the unique character and story of the American West, ranging from the rarest historical to the most ephemeral materials. He preserved stories that could not or would not otherwise be told. As he often stated, "History is what is saved." He also believed that books and artifacts of material culture were treasures, and referred to them as the "gold of the mind."

One of Gary's colleagues described his impact: "He was generous with his knowledge, patient with questions, and always able to connect the smallest pamphlet or ephemera piece to a much larger historical story. His enthusiasm for the material was contagious." Gary believed in bringing young people into the profession. One such inspired colleague shared his story: "He educated and inspired so many of us who were just finding our way in the rare book world. I will always be grateful for his kindness, his example as a scholar and

librarian, and the time he took to encourage new generations of bibliographers.”

Gary retired in 2017 as Principal Librarian Emeritus of Special Collections of the California State Library in Sacramento, a position he had held since 1980. In 2018 he retired as the Executive Director of the California State Library Foundation where he had served for twenty years. Previously, he held positions as Head Librarian of the Sutro Library, a branch of the California State Library in San Francisco, and as Library Director for the California Historical Society. He began his library career in 1971 as Bibliographer of Western Americana at the Henry E. Huntington Library in San Marino. For several years, he enjoyed teaching a course on Books of the American West for the California Rare Book School.

Gary authored numerous books and articles, gave hundreds of lectures and presentations, and curated several notable exhibitions. His descriptive bibliography of the California Gold Rush (1997) and the Klondike and Alaska Gold Rushes (2021) are two of the most authoritative references on their respective subjects. The latter was awarded Honorable Mention by the Bibliographical Society of America. “California Calls You: The Art of the Golden State 1870-1940” (2000), co-authored with his wife, KD, was awarded a Silver Medal by The Commonwealth Club of California Annual California Book Awards in 2001. They collaborated again with essays written for “The Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament,” a publication covering the history and architecture of the Sacramento Cathedral at the time of its restoration and rededication (2006). His book, “Architectural Terra Cotta of Gladding McBean,” (1989) spurred a revival of respect for the history of this business and its significant contributions to the architectural landscape.

For many years, Gary was a valued member of several bibliophilic organizations such as the Book Club of California, the Roxburghe Club of San Francisco, the Zamorano Book Club, and the Bibliographical Society of America. In 2019, he was inducted into the California Library Hall of Fame. He was presented with the prestigious Hubert Howe Bancroft Award in 2018, and in

1998, the Book Club of California's Oscar Lewis Award for outstanding contributions in the field of California History.

Gary grew up in La Cañada, California, in a home designed by his father Jack Kurutz, a prominent commercial artist. His mother, Marion, was a talented musician, artist, and scientist and it was she who encouraged his devotion to books and history. Gary earned both his Bachelor's and Master's degrees in History from the University of San Diego, and his Master's in Library Science from the University of Southern California.

Gary is survived by his wife of forty-five years, KD; his son, Nicholas; his daughter-in-law, Blanca; his granddaughter, Serena; and his sister, Kristin. His brother, Denis, predeceased him.

Gary will return to Sacramento where he left his heart and built his legacy. His memorial mass will take place at the Cathedral of the Blessed Sacramento in February of 2026.

For those wishing to honor him, the family suggests gifts to the “Gary Kurutz Memorial Fund” of the California State Library Foundation or to the Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament with gifts designated for architectural restoration or programs aiding the homeless.

# Tribute Wall

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“ As a former CA State Librarian from 2004-2009, one of the joys of that position was the opportunity to work with Gary. His knowledge of California history and his willingness to share that knowledge was amazing. He was a great colleague and friend and will be sorely missed. Susan Hildreth

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**Susan Hildreth** - January 09 at 06:44 PM

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“ We will all miss Gary and his contributions to historical research and bibliography. I for one also miss getting on the phone and talking to him about some new thing I acquired and what his perspective on it might be. I will also miss going on walks with him and discussing the state of the world. He was among the few librarians who was both a scholar, a master creator of exhibits for people and someone who built a great collection because he had special awareness of the market for and sellers of Western Americana. Fond memories reinforced by his books on my shelves.

One last for now, one of my life's memorable occasions was when I visited him at the Sutro library that he led so well. I was delivering some items he bought and he showed me the magnificent shelves filled with impressive color plate books in the stacks. We went to his office and he said you might like to see this as he handed me the libraries First Folio Shakespeare. Great experience with a great friend

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**Ken Harrison** - January 08 at 12:19 AM